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'Secret wars' rarely succeed

By Arnold R. Isaacs

As Congress reopens debate on funding anti-Sandinista rebels in Nicaragua, it might do well to remember the outcome of similar Central Intelligence Agency shenanigans in the past.

The list of CIA-sponsored "secret armies" over the last quarter-century or so is a fairly long one. It has included Sumatran dissidents opposing Indonesia's left-leaning President Sukarno, Tibetan Khamba tribesmen harassing the Chinese Communists, the "Armee Clandestine" of Hmong and other tribal minorities in Laos, the Kurdish rebels in Iraq and of course the Bay of Pigs brigade.

Without exception, those ventures ended in defeat, in varying degrees of embarrassment for the United States and in the abandonment and betrayal of men and women who accepted CIA arms but discovered, too late, that the American stakes and agenda were different from their own.

Among the various lessons of those episodes, one is that clandestine warfare, once started, is not so easy to keep under control.

Often the reason lies with the very operators who find their way onto intelligence agency payrolls. Anyone even passingly acquainted with the milieu will recognize author Thomas Powers' description of the type. "Aggressive, enthusiastic and too often morally careless," Powers wrote about the CIA's "adventurers" in his excellent 1979 book, "The Man Who Kept the Secrets."

American policies, when carried out in secrecy by such men, can too easily become mortgaged to their adventurism.

Another lesson can be derived from a success. Kermit Roosevelt, who ran the CIA operation ousting Mohammed Mossadegh and restoring the pro-American Shah of Iran in 1953, pointed out to his superiors afterward that the plan worked only because the CIA was correct about the political and military forces at work in Iran at the time.

"If our analysis had been wrong, we'd have fallen

flat," Roosevelt said. And if the CIA were called on for similar operations in the future, he added, it had better be certain that U.S. aims were the same as those of the people receiving the clandestine support. Otherwise, the U.S. should use its power directly and overtly, through the marines and not through intelligence agencies.

That was sound advice, not often followed in later years. Both of Roosevelt's points have particular relevance to Nicaragua, where the Reagan administration seems to be operating on highly suspect assessments of both its friends and its enemies and where there is a real question whether the American government and its Nicaraguan clients have the same agenda.

The administration clearly imagines a rebel victory would be a significant blow against communism in the region. In fact, such an outcome could damage important U.S. interests. It would be seen as, and to a large extent would be, a restoration of the Somoza dictatorship, prominently labeled "Made in the U.S.A." [Though the exile political leadership includes some anti-Somoza figures, the military command leadership of the main Honduras-based guerrilla force is dominated by Somocista officers.]

If that were to happen, there would be unfavorable repercussions in a great many countries in the hemisphere, while there would be no lasting end to the cycle of violence and vengeance that is the real threat to U.S. hopes for Central America's future.

U.S. support for the contras is ill-advised for many other reasons. It endangers a fragile stability in Honduras and heightens tensions in Costa Rica, the region's only genuine democracy. And it relies on violence rather than political wisdom, which is what Central America desperately needs. It represents an effort to impose a U.S. solution instead of one involving and accommodating Latin American political realities.

The "secret war" against the Sandinistas conflicts with U.S. values and reflects the worst aspects of U.S. foreign policy—a clumsy, belligerent anticommunism that is too ignorant to understand either the political forces in Central America or the true nature of U.S. interests there. If it denies further funds, Congress will have done the Reagan administration and the country a favor, rescuing them from an effort that is not only dumb, but dangerous.

Arnold R. Isaacs was a correspondent in Latin America and Asia. He is the author of "Without Honor: Defeat in Vietnam and Cambodia."